

Office for
Students



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2 April 2020

An update from the Office for Students on COVID-19 and our project monitoring processes

Universities and colleges are facing huge pressures and uncertainties in responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We want to support your efforts to minimise its impact on the SIHED programme and to avoid placing any unnecessary burdens on both you and the projects you manage on our behalf.

Our letter to higher education providers' accountable officers, published on our website on 26 March¹, explained that we are adapting our regulatory requirements to support providers and protect students during this time. I am writing to you and to other project leads to set out how we will be applying this approach to the projects we fund and monitor. To summarise:

- **Monitoring** – We will be contacting you in the next two weeks to arrange a call with you or the SIHED programme manager. We want to understand the approach you are taking to revising your aims, objectives and delivery activity, and to identify any ways we can help.

As part of this process, please could you contact all organisations you are funding through the OfS SIHED grant to engage with them on any revisions to their aims, objectives and delivery activity.

We will use future monitoring and final reports to understand the approach being taken during this period. In line with our broader approach to regulation, we will take into account

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-requirements-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic/

the circumstances and assess whether individual projects have made reasonable decisions that take into account the needs of students.

- **Funding** – Please advise us if we should reprofile or stop the current payment profile for SIHED to ensure funds keep pace with revised delivery plans.
- **Evaluation** – We are following the Government Social Research professional guidance that, on grounds of personal safety to both researchers and participants, all face-to-face evaluation and research activity should stop until it is safe and ethically appropriate to proceed. This may have an impact on the evaluation of individual projects and the wider funding programme.

Our approach

We are grateful to the SIHED programme manager for sharing updates based on discussions with SIHED workstream leads about the impact of the pandemic. Please continue to be pro-active in advising us about the changes that will need to be made to the delivery of the projects and the programme as a whole.

Given the disruption across many aspects of our daily lives, we understand that delivery of activities may reduce significantly and could in some cases cease completely whilst this situation is ongoing. However, we know also that many elements can still be delivered. We will be flexible regarding events, deliverables and deadlines, and will work with you and the projects to agree appropriately amended timelines on a case-by-case basis.

We will use future monitoring and final reports to understand the approach taken during this period. In line with our broader approach to regulation, we will take into account the circumstances and assess whether reasonable decisions have been taken which take into account the needs of students.

This approach recognises that different workstreams will be affected differently and may require varied approaches:

Outreach

We understand discussions between the SIHED programme manager and outreach officers is already underway to establish what can be delivered online, and what activities planned as part of the legacy work can be brought forward. This includes creating videos, resources for teachers and career advisors, and looking into what can be provided now to schools for them to use as part of their support for home schooling. We appreciate this proactive approach and ask that the programme manager agrees with the OfS a deadline to submit a proposal setting out revised outputs and success criteria.

National campaign

We understand that this workstream is less affected than others as the national campaign is mostly run through social media. The need to raise awareness of allied health courses and to increase recruitment remains. We ask that the programme manager keeps us informed of any suggested change to the campaign strategy.

Challenge fund

We understand that all challenge fund projects supported under the first call have now completed and are therefore unaffected.

We anticipate that all challenge fund projects supported under the second call (CF2) are likely to be affected. We ask that you formally contact all CF2 leads to agree changes to the project in line with the approach set out in this letter.

Because the period of funding is due to finish for most projects in December 2020, it may be that some projects wish to discuss reducing the scope of the project, for which we would also expect to reduce the amount of funding accordingly. Others may propose extending deadlines beyond December 2020. If such cases arise, please engage with us in the first instance.

Please find attached some proposed wording for this letter at Annex A. We recognise this will need to be tailored to reflect the College of Podiatry's own approach. We are keen to ensure these letters are sent as soon as possible.

New projects (orthoptics, placement support for podiatry and P&O, e-training)

The OfS agreed funding for three projects to start in April 2020 and finish in December 2020.

Two of these projects (orthoptics and placement support) are delivered by third parties. We ask that you engage with them to discuss whether they still wish to start their project as planned. If this is the case, we will want to know how they are proposing to adapt their activity and outputs to meet the overall objectives of the project, recognising that success criteria may need to be revised.

The e-training project is led by the College of Podiatry, so we ask that you discuss with us how it may be revised as soon as possible.

The work of the SIHED programme is overseen by the SIHED Programme Board, which is next due to meet on 2 July. We do not want to wait until then to agree revised approaches, so we will convene a teleconference between the SIHED programme manager, the OfS and the chair of the Programme Board to discuss the impact of the pandemic on the delivery of the programme and agree next steps. We will be in touch to agree a date for this discussion.

Funding

As you are aware, under normal circumstances the OfS is unable to pay in advance of need. We can be flexible during this period, but we also need to ensure that the funding we provide is used appropriately and is in the public and student interest.

Please advise us if changes to project activities mean that we should reprofile or stop any of the current payment profiles for projects. This means that we can check that funds keep pace with delivery. We do, however, want to make sure that project staff continue to be paid. To this end, we can be flexible in order to ensure essential cashflow is not adversely affected during this period. We also want to maintain the capacity to increase or resume delivering activity once the crisis is over.

Monitoring

We are still able to process project monitoring reports and had been expecting your annual monitoring report at the end of March. We propose that the SIHED programme manager reports as planned, as we are aware that a draft annual monitoring report was close to completion before the coronavirus outbreak. Given the timing, however, we do not expect this report to cover coronavirus planning and disruption.

Evaluation

We are following the Government Social Research professional guidance that, on grounds of personal safety to both researchers and participants, all face-to-face evaluation and research activity should stop until it is safe and ethically appropriate to proceed. This may have an impact on the evaluation of the projects and the wider SIHED programme.

In respect of the external evaluation of the programme, we are working with our evaluators to understand the impact on their planned activities, particularly on any work with students as this may not be ethically appropriate or feasible at this point. If you have any concerns or questions about your own evaluation of your project, please do let us know.

Further information

For more general information, we will continue to update the coronavirus page on our website with the latest information: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-wellbeing-and-protection/coronavirus/

During this period, we are also looking for ways to bring projects together virtually to exchange useful information and provide mutual support as required, so we will keep you informed on this.

If it is useful to discuss any of the points in this letter, please do let us know and we will organise a telephone call.

Your first point of contact remains Helene Fouquet, helene.fouquet@officeforstudents.org.uk. You can also email the strategic projects team at OfSCC@officeforstudents.org.uk. This inbox is monitored throughout the working day and a member of the team will ensure the information you provide and/or your query is taken forward.

Yours sincerely

Chris Millward
Director of Fair Access and Participation

Annex A: Proposed wording for a letter to CF2 leads to agree changes to the project

An update from the Office for Students and the College of Podiatry on the coronavirus (COVID-19) and the SIHED Challenge fund programme

Universities and colleges are facing huge pressures and uncertainties in responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We want to support your efforts to minimise its impact on your SIHED project and to avoid placing any unnecessary burdens on you.

The OfS published a letter to accountable officers on their website on 26 March, explaining that they are adapting their regulatory requirements to support providers and protect students during this time. I am writing to you and to other SIHED project leads to set out how we will be applying this approach to the OfS funded projects. To summarise:

- **Funding** - Please advise us if we need to reprofile or stop the current payment profile for the project.
- **Aims, objectives and models of delivery** - We will be contacting you in the next two weeks to arrange a call. We want to understand the approach you are taking to revising your aims, objectives and delivery activity, and to identify any ways we can help.
- **Evaluation** - Please continue to gather evaluation data and if you consider new ways of delivering, please take into account how this may affect your evaluation strategy.
- **Information requests** - We will endeavour to limit the number of information requests at this time. However, the SIHED programme manager will be in touch to arrange a discussion with the project lead within the next two weeks to develop an understanding of your approach during this period and identify any ways in which we can help.

Further detail on each of the elements listed above is provided below.

Funding

In line with the approach the OfS has asked us to adopt, we will continue to deliver funding to projects to maintain capacity and adapt delivery where possible. Please advise us if we need to reprofile or stop the current payment profile for the project. We do want to ensure that staff involved continue to be paid and the OfS is prepared to be flexible in order to ensure the project's essential cashflow is not adversely affected during this period.

As you are aware, the College of Podiatry is under normal circumstances unable to pay in advance of need and we need to ensure that funding we provide is used appropriately and in the public and student interest.

We will expect project leads to report any underspend at the end of the summer monitoring period (February – July 2020) and we will decide at that point whether to reclaim any funding, given the potential for this to be higher than previously anticipated.

Aims, objectives and models of delivery

Given the disruption across many aspects of our daily lives, we understand that delivery of activities may reduce significantly and could in some cases cease completely whilst this situation is ongoing. However, we know also that many elements can still be delivered. We will be flexible regarding events, deliverables and deadlines, and will work with you to agree appropriately amended timelines on a case-by-case basis.

We understand that targets may need to be revised but we would like you to explore alternative modes of delivery.

Because the period of funding is due to finish for most projects in December 2020, it may be that some projects wish to discuss reducing the scope of the project, for which we would also expect to reduce the amount of funding.

Evaluation

We are following the Government Social Research professional guidance that, on grounds of personal safety to both researchers and participants, all face-to-face evaluation and research activity should stop until it is safe and ethically appropriate to proceed. This may have an impact on the evaluation of individual projects and the wider funding programme. We ask that you continue to gather the necessary data for your internal project evaluation, though we will be flexible on deadlines for reporting these to us.

The overall evaluation of the SIHED project, contracted to SQW, will continue. The OfS and the SIHED programme manager are liaising with them. We anticipate that they will be in touch later in the spring, but the format and timescale is still to be defined. We will ask them to be flexible in relation to timescales, but gathering evidence continues to be a critical part of their impact evaluation so we want this to be sustained as far as possible.

Information requests

We will endeavour to limit the number of requests for information, recognising that you are working in a very different environment.

We will, however, arrange an update call between your project lead and the SIHED programme manager so that we can understand further your approach to revising your delivery model during the period of the coronavirus outbreak and identify any ways in which we can help.

Yours sincerely,